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THE ANARCHIC ELEMENT IN SOME ULTRA-MODERN FUTURIST MUSIC

By HENRY HOLDEN HUSS

Honored Members of the Rembrandt Club:

WE all remember the clever mot of the witty Gaul (was it Descartes?) who said *Tout est relatif, rien n'est absolut*. Now if this is true, that all is relative and nothing is absolute, then the above remark is not entirely "absolute," and there must be a few things in this distracted universe of our that are "absolute." Some of these things in art are: order, proportion, design, clearness, points of repose, contrast, and last but not least, beauty. It is the conviction of the writer that these qualities are indispensable in a well-rounded work of art, and to be more specific, in a beautiful, well conceived and well thought-out piece of music.

Let it be understood at the outset that the many fascinating qualities of the best ultra modern music, such as are found for example in much of Debussy, in the earlier works of Scriabine and the earlier works of Schoenberg—its daring, its elusiveness, its subtle experiments in shifting color, new effects in modulation and dissonance, complex rhythms, etc., are all recognized and appreciated at their full worth; but it is the spirit of anarchy, *i. e.*, often the spirit of the destruction of all order and design, the impotent striving for originality at all costs, and incessant and unnecessary modulation, a total absence of repose, a rigid avoidance of all euphony, which are surely some of the things to be deplored and fought against in so-called futurist music.

Let it be emphasized that real progress is to be welcomed, *i. e.*, new modulations, new rhythms, new forms, new effects in dissonance and color, etc.; but if the past teaches us anything it teaches us that in all art there are fundamentals which, proceeding straight from the Almighty Source of all invention and inspiration, are eternal. Let us briefly consider a few of what we shall boldly and unhesitatingly call eternal and absolute essentials of real music, and their rejection or absence from much of the so-called futurist music.

ORDER

Milton's well known aphorism "Order is Heaven's first law" should be carefully conned by many of these ultra moderns. Some of these worthies' idea of order is the incessant repetition, in slightly varied forms, of a fragmentary morsel of a "motive"; but there is no real orderly design: it is all improvised. I remember when I was a young student having a very interesting chat with that great Russian, Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky, on composition. He remarked that many young composers of modern times (this was in 1892 or 1893) improvised instead of composing; that he himself worked very laboriously and slowly, it took him hours often to do what others did in a few minutes. The student of Beethoven learns from his sketch books how carefully and laboriously this master of masters worked, changing and polishing a theme many times. The theme of the funeral march of the Eroica Symphony was written in thirteen

different ways before it assumed its present form; so a master builds for eternity! One of the most flagrant sins against order and proportion is the incessant, restless and often senseless employment of unnecessary modulation. In trying to produce variety the misguided futurist frequently produces a most deadly and exasperating effect of monotony. Did you ever try to look into a kaleidoscope for more than a minute? The incessant change of design in a very short time wearies and finally disgusts the eye. Wagner has been accused of modulating too much and unnecessarily, but it is not so; when he modulates it is always for a significant purpose and not to show that he is an ultra modern. As H. E. Krehbiel in his illuminative and interesting studies on the Wagnerian drama remarks of the prelude to "Rheingold" (which has over two hundred measures entirely on a pedal point on E flat, the "motifs" of which are descriptive of the River Rhine and are all likewise based on the chord of E flat) that, as nothing else but the river is being depicted, there is no necessity of changing key as one wave after another flows by. Today forsooth an ultra modern would have thought it his duty to give a different chord, ay, a different key to each wavelet; naturally this would have destroyed all effect of unity.

POINTS OF REPOSE

Herbert Spencer's "mot" to the effect that "you can have a house or you can have a museum, but you cannot have both" is vitally true. I remember an intensely interesting Chamber Music composition by Schoenberg. It was admirable in many points, quivered with emotion and incessant play of rhythms, was full of marvelously clever counterpoint, but alas! through all the thrilling complex of the fifty minutes of its hectic intellectuality I do not remember more than two or three points of repose. Oh! If Schoenberg had but learned some lessons from Greek art! We made the contention that there are some eternal and absolute principles in art. What a glorious confirmation we find of this in the best modern art of the last few centuries. Witness the return, age after age, of Greek forms and principles in architecture and Greek sculpture. In connection with our mention of the abuse of the use of fragmentary "motifs" in music a pertinent example occurs to me. In one of Richard Strauss' wonderfully interesting symphonic poems occurs this bald naïve "motivette"

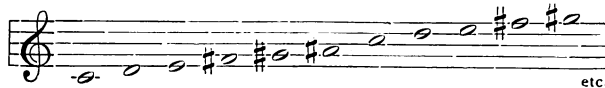


etc. This stalks in and out of the score, never accomplishing anything that can be discovered by the "mental microscope" and certainly not ravishing us by its beauty or originality. Call this hypercriticism if you will, but on the other hand

I will cheerfully admit that this composition has moments of great beauty, dramatic force, color, etc.

CLEARNESS

Clearness in an eternal principle of a really great art work. Many a futurist sins here in a flagrant manner. Having all the resources of counterpoint at his mental finger-tips, he thinks nothing of having ten or twelve "motifs" jiggling at once. It would seem in his marvelous B minor Mass that Bach had reached the limit of human comprehension when he employed five different themes at once. The trouble with the futurist often is that not having *one* really beautiful theme to offer he must dazzle (let me be vulgar and say razzle-dazzle) our ears by concocting an unholy mixture of, a whole bait-box full of, wriggling inconsequential "motivelets." Some of these effects in modern music have affected me very much as an old fashioned "raree" mechanical show does (the kind that was worked by clockwork). Ten or twelve trades are shown at once in operation: one man is sawing wood, another is painting a house, another is hammering on an anvil, another is shoeing a horse, still another is killing a pig and so on *ad nauseam*. My brethren in art, *this*, if you will, is *consummately* clever; but is it ART? Can it leave a definite impression on the senses? All great art was born because it *had* to be born. The trouble with much of the futurist music is that it has been deliberately *manufactured*. There being no real inspiration, originality (as I have already remarked) must be sought at *all* costs. The futurist having at least a subconscious conviction that his music in itself is not beautiful or really worth while, must always have a title or a story or an elaborate analysis attached to the music. Some of these gentry have evidently never heard of the famous and true saying "music begins where speech leaves off." It is surely a degradation of the divine art to create the impression in the mind of the hearer that music in itself is not sufficiently worth while, but must invariably be boosted up by the sister art of Literature. Some of the latter-day devices in modern music are already trite and banal. Take for example, the so-called "Whole Tone Scale," which might be called a feeble caricature on eternity in that it commences nowhere and ends nowhere! Play over this so-called "Whole Tone Scale" and you will find that you can begin or stop at any tone, since the intervals between the tones are equal to the ear:



In considering design, as one of the great elements of real musical art, it has often struck the writer how frequently the ultra modern music, otherwise good, is lacking in a definite, satisfactory close. I remember that this conclusion of mine was the means of my making the acquaintance of Safonoff, the great Russian conductor. It was after a concert of Russian music superbly performed that I met him in the "artists' room" and asked him if the very interesting concerts of the gifted Rachmaninoff, which had just been given, did not suffer by suddenly *stopping* but not *closing*?

It was a rather delicate question to ask of a passionate partisan of the Russian school, but his innate sense of justice came to the fore and he replied "You are exactly right; we must meet often and discuss this and kindred topics." This defect in much of modern music is undoubtedly due to the modern anarchistical tendency of overturning all established forms, a want of comprehension of the great and indubitable fact of the necessity of architectual design in music. If Ruskin was right in saying that architecture is frozen music, there must be a measure of truth in the inversion: "In a certain sense music is liquefied architecture." This want of design also often causes a lack of individuality in much modern music. In the classics each movement had its own definite character which contrasted well with the others. We often find the scheme of a classic symphony or sonata was something like this: a vigorous, dignified first movement with heroic and lyric elements, then a sparkling "jocose" scherzo or minuet, followed by a tender, partly melancholy slow movement filled with intimate grace and poetry, winding up with a joyful rondo full of optimism and sunshine with a climacteric ending. You will find this scheme in the Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven symphonies and sonatas, and in a modified form also in many of Schumann's, Mendelssohn's and Brahms's works in sonata form. A cursory examination of many modern or ultra modern works will show us that all four movements are too much alike. Each has great climacteric moments in which the brass blares inordinately, and there are in each movement many quick and exciting rhythms. These things prevent a sense of grateful variety and contrast when we consider the work as a whole.

Some moderns actually excuse their hideous forced marriages of tones in chords on the ground that these tones are all found in the overtones of many sounds and chords. Now if we examine the overtones of a chord of three or four tones we certainly find among the higher overtones some that do not exactly make concords with the original fundamental tones; but if you permit all these resultant overtones to sound with *equal force together*, you will be tortured with a department store assortment of naturals, sharps and flats which have no apparent affinity one with another. All this is obvious to any one with the slightest superficial knowledge of acoustics. Now, in the case of tones when struck singly or together, the overtones when produced on properly constructed and played instruments, are only *very* faintly heard or felt (they have an artistic sense of proportion, bless them!). But the "ultra modern" with a distorted Chinese lack of perspective has many or all of them (in proportion to his anarchistical tendencies) sounding with equal strength and the resultant pandemonium would certainly have inspired Dante to write a new canto for his "Inferno"! One young futurist has written a "Wild Man's Dance" and employed frequently in it these *pleasing* combinations of tone-clusters!



all struck *simultaneously!* We may admit the propriety of this naïve discord in a savage dance; but it is curious to note that this or similar tone-clusters are also employed by the same composer in a composition called "Impressions of Notre Dame," giving *us* the impression that the great cathedral with its wonderful beauty made in some of its parts a similar effect on his mind as a wild man's dance (Query; was it the gargoyles that did this?). When one has the courage to cry out against atrocities like these, these monstrous crimes against beauty, euphony and artistic proportion, the reply is made by some timid souls: "Beethoven and Wagner were also abused and misunderstood in their lifetime"; I verily believe that many critics are espousing the course of the futurist because they are afraid that history will repeat itself and in time *their* criticism, if not appreciative of futuristic art, will be discredited—a fine argument indeed to justify the ignoring of all the claims of beauty and sanity! Surely one of the essential characteristics of enduring art, of great art, is

sincerity. And right here is where it seems to me that so many of the futurists err, I mean in the desire to be original at all costs. It is dangerously easy to be original if one ignores all canons of beauty and sanity and logic. Originality in itself alone is not necessarily a good and desirable thing. This ought to be self evident to all who dare to work in any of the fine arts.

But let us not be pessimistic; the pendulum will swing back again as it has done many times in the history of art; and beauty, ideality, simplicity, order and proportion will come again into their own. It is without doubt true that the restlessness, the savage, reckless, anarchistic spirit which has manifested itself in politics and culminated in the present gigantic war has also mightily affected such a delicate, sensitive art as Music; but with the coming of Peace will also come a recrudescence of music that will again be a refreshment for our souls. Music that will again have serene moments of joy as well as those of stress and fury and agony—Music that will have lofty ideals and soar to the very heavens of celestial beauty!

Henry Holden Huss

THE POET

To the human the Supreme
Poet speaks in wind and stream,
Tenderly He would express
His meaning in each loveliness.

What is it He would declare
In this beauty everywhere—
What dearest thought of His is heard
In the moonlight's secret word?

Simply would He speak and clear
As man to man His message dear:
Ay—and well enough he knows
Who shall understand His rose.

Nor humblest, nor most exquisite
Detail or phrase does He omit
From His great poem, confident
It shall be noted what He meant.

And cunningly doth still devise
New Aprils for His poet's eyes
For whose joy all things were wrought
That without him were as nought.

Holy Poet, I have heard
Thy best music, Thy least word;
Not Thy beauty's tiniest part
Has escaped this loving heart!

While the great world goes its way
I watch in wonder all the day,
All the night my spirit sings
For the loveliness of things.

But for lonely men like me
It were wasted utterly
All this beauty, vainly spent—
Unavailing lavishment.

Little cricket, never fear,
There is one who waits to hear—
Nor is there loveliness so shy
It shall escape a poet's eye.

For the world enough it were
To have a useful earth and bare,
But for poets it is made
All in loveliness arrayed.

For his eye the little moth
Wears her coat of colored cloth
And to please his ear the deep
Ocean murmurs in her sleep . . .

Rustle gently in the breeze
For his delight the poplar trees,
And above his happy head
The fable of the stars is spread.

John Hall Wheelock